

SEATTLE URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION

Tom Early, Chair • Steve Zemke, Vice-Chair
Weston Brinkley • Leif Fixen • Reid Haefer • Donna Kostka • Richard Martin • Joanna Nelson de Flores
Erik Rundell • Andrew Zellers

The Urban Forestry Commission was established to advise the Mayor and City Council concerning the establishment of policy and regulations governing the protection, management, and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle

December 7, 2016

Meeting Notes

Seattle Municipal Tower, Room 2750 (27th floor)
700 5th Avenue, Seattle

Attending

Commissioners

Tom Early – chair
Steve Zemke – vice-chair
Reid Haefer
Donna Kostka
Joanna Nelson de Flores

Staff

Sandra Pinto de Bader - OSE
Christopher Williams - Parks
Robert Stowers - Parks

Absent- Excused

Weston Brinkley
Leif Fixen
Richard Martin
Erik Rundell
Andrew Zellers

Public

None

NOTE: Meeting notes are not exhaustive. For more details listen to the digital recording of the meeting at: <http://www.seattle.gov/urbanforestrycommission/meetingdocs.htm>

Call to order

Tom called the meeting to order and read the mission statement and agenda.

Public comment

None

Adoption of November 9 meeting notes

ACTION: A motion to approve the November 9 meeting notes as amended was made, seconded, and approved.

Parks Performance Report – Christopher Williams, Robert Stowers (Parks)

Christopher and Robert presented the Parks Performance Report to the Commission.

This report is an audit of ground maintenance practices. In 2014 voters passed Parks District initiative with the expectation of higher level of accountability from the department based on industry best practices.

Funding was allocated to do a series of audits. They started first with grounds maintenance. The audit took eight months, findings show progress, adequate resources, maintaining parks at a higher level than industry standards by park type. The best use of resources is to allocate a level of maintenance at a specific level of service that is more strategic. The study's recommendations tend to focus on allocation of maintenance staff crews, level of service (LOS) based on park type, more transparency to the public about maintenance practices. Move away from a cookie cutter approach to pivot to more of a preventive maintenance vs. demand maintenance approach.

Highlights:

Methodology:

- in depth maintenance performance evaluation
- department wide performance assessment
- longer-term performance review agenda
- interviewed Parks staff

Parks maintenance operations

Key findings:

- budget staffing allocations appear appropriate when compared to other comparable communities
- current staffing allocations result in inconsistent levels of maintenance for parks across districts and by type of park
- maintenance hours tracked are significantly below what would be expected based upon budgeted staff allocations
- park condition assessments generally found well-maintained parks, with only minor maintenance issues.
- Park maintenance standards are not modified to meet the needs of specific parks.
- Planned park maintenance standards cannot be achieved with existing staff resources as currently allocated and utilize; however, based upon park assessments conducted and best practices, the adopted service standards appear higher than necessary to achieve appropriate maintenance levels.
- DPR doesn't have a comprehensive asset management program in place
- Park condition assessments are not being conducted frequently enough or in sufficient detail to provide the data necessary to evaluate maintenance performance or plan future maintenance needs.
- Detailed information regarding current park condition ratings, planned improvements and maintenance activities, and the targeted condition level for individual parks is not available on the DPR's website.
- Current operations are not providing sufficient guidance on work priorities for staff to allocate existing resources to highest priority work activities.

Key Recommendations:

- Establish standards for specific maintenance activities based on specific criteria, including: type of park, park usage type, time of year, required maintenance levels, and existing condition.
- Reevaluate and modify staffing allocations between districts and specific maintenance activities once new maintenance standards are adopted.
- Implement clear communication regarding new standards and maintenance priorities between supervisors and staff to successfully achieve intended outcomes.

- Develop on-going, comprehensive, park assessment program to quantify the current condition of parks and associated infrastructure (comfort stations, playground equipment, benches, fields) and to assess the impact of investments in infrastructure and changes in operational practices on the maintenance of parks over time.
- Develop, in the short term, a simplified maintenance assessment program.
- Provide information about current park conditions, planned improvements, scheduled maintenance activities and targeted conditions available on the department's website for increased transparency and accountability
- Implement a comprehensive asset management program
- Improve operational practices including: enhance work activity scheduling, increased accountability for staff in completing work activities, more robust training on equipment operation, and enhanced supervisory training.

Department Performance

Key findings:

- DPR's proposed performance framework, if implemented, may be referred to as "best in class"
- The developed framework provides appropriate linkages between all critical activities within the department and the proposed outcomes.
- The comprehensive nature of this framework and the focus on participant outcomes, will require intensive training of staff to ensure they understand how to use the system and how their actions impact outcomes
- Unlike less comprehensive approaches, this proposed framework will require more time to develop, refine, and implement than other approaches.
- The time and effort required to capture accurate and consistent data regarding outcomes will necessitate the allocation of additional resources than a less complex or comprehensive performance measurement program would require.
- Existing data sources are insufficient, in most cases, to meet the data needs of the proposed framework. Data sources will need to be developed and implemented as the program is implemented.

Key recommendations:

- more actionable and less robust performance outcomes should be considered for initial implementation. This would reduce staff time and resources required to develop consistent and accurate data to evaluate and report on the outcomes.
- DPR must ensure that data collected for performance measurements is complete and accurate to provide actionable data from which key management decisions can be made on departmental performance.
- Conduct an annual resident and program participant survey to get data on satisfaction levels and impact of services to provide data needed to report on performance measures.
- Key performance metrics related to maintenance and recreation activities should be adopted as short-term measure for performance.
- Time-based outcomes should be developed to manage public expectations regarding outcome achievement.

Longer-term performance review agenda

Areas identified for future evaluation:

- Fleet/equipment maintenance shop evaluation
- Asset management program assessment/technical assistance
- Capital project management
 - o Project selection and development
 - o Project implementation
- Recreation program assessment

Chair and Vice-chair elections

Commissioners held elections.

ACTION: The Commission elected Tom Early as chair and Steve Zemke as vice-chair for 2017.

Letter of support for Plant Amnesty grant application – discussion and possible vote

ACTION: A motion to approve the letter of support as amended was made, seconded, and approved.

Draft Climate Preparedness Strategy – follow up discussion

Commission reviewed the Trees section.

They need to scrutinize the current emphasis on native tree species, because with changing climate, the introduction and use of a diverse species that might not be native but might be more adaptable, would improve the resiliency of our urban forest. Diversify enough to support native wildlife. Sandra will produce a draft for discussion at the next meeting.

Public comment

none

New Business

Steve introduced a first draft to address the issues brought forward by Lance Young. The Commission will discuss next week.

Donna would like to revisit the budget letter and a table showing the work different departments do on trees.

Adjourn

Public input:

-----Original Message-----

From: Lance Young [mailto:lance_young@yahoo.com]

Sent: Monday, December 05, 2016 8:40 AM

To: Pinto de Bader, Sandra <Sandra.Pinto_de_Bader@Seattle.gov>

Subject: Street Tree Preservation

To: Sandra Pinto De Bader <sandra.pinto_de_bader@seattle.gov>

Subject: Street Tree Preservation

Hi Sandra

It is sleeting out here in the north end of the city! It will probably not stick but is good to see anyway this close to Christmas.

Would you please forward this email attachment, and response to last commission meetings presentation, to the Urban Forestry Commission for me, and send me confirmation that it has been received and forwarded.

Thank You
Lance Young
206-363-0859

To: Urban Forestry Commission
Re: Street Tree Preservation

Thank you for taking on this important issue for serious consideration and analysis. Cass Turnbull in her emailed comments for your last meeting did a good job of expressing how important this issue is, saying that "trees under wires are still an important part of Seattle's Urban Forest, accounting for 18% of the City's total urban forest and half of our publicly owned trees. Her perspective reaches back to the previous vegetation management department administration under Ben Barnes saying "He had control of his crews and considered the good of trees, and their tolerances, as well as how to keep costs of line clearance pruning low. As a long time defender of City Light's utility pruning practices, it is with a certain amount of regret that I write to say that the current state of pruning is unnecessarily damaging and should be changed." The overly severe pruning being done is also unnecessarily costly to taxpayers and damaging to the trees, increasing waterspout growth and threatening the viability of street trees. Some of these damaged trees will become hazard trees and will have to be removed in the future. At their presentation at the last Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) meeting Seattle City Light (SCL) admitted that they are having to extend their pruning cycle even further because of the costs of the program.

There are several inaccuracies that need to be pointed out from the SCL presentation at the 11/9 meeting. The draft meeting minutes are being used as the reference for these. City Light claimed that Portland General Electric removes more canopy than SCL does because they do some rounding of street trees for appearance. Though it is true that Portland is on a shorter pruning cycle than Seattle they have a pre-trim clearance of only 3' and a post-trim of 8'-10'. SCL starts at a pre-trim of 10', and posttrim of 18' or more. So it is not true that Portland removes more canopy than we do.

In SCL's original written comments about Snohomish PUD they were not comparing apples to apples, calling out the under power line clearances because Snohomish prunes for phone lines and SCL does not. So to be accurate the side or top clearances should be compared. After this comment, SCL during their oral presentation tried to claim that Snohomish PUD used the same/similar side pruning clearances to theirs. Mr. Dave Bayrd read from the first line of SnoPUD's "Tree Pruning Specifications" page 4 indicating that they use 12' as a pre-trim minimum. This was read from the same documentation that the Commission received, which had this entire paragraph highlighted in yellow. It is hard to imagine that Mr. Bayrd did not understand this was a misrepresentation of the facts, since the second sentence in that same highlighted paragraph said that SnoPUD maintains "a minimum clearance of no vegetation within 4 feet of distribution conductors" not 12' as suggested. (please see the documents sent with our original communications) The utility's representations that "distribution clearances have not been increased" is also not accurate. You need only look at the 2008-2013 distribution pruning guidelines for SCL's subcontractors included with our original communications and posted on the UFC sight for the last meeting which states: "The...clearing limits...extend out from primary conductors to a distance of

10-ft" not 18' or ten plus several years of growth, just 10 feet. (see item D. on page 10). Their verbal response to UFC inquiry was a SCL post-trim clearance of ~18'. They do not often like to state this figure since it sounds so extreme. You might also look at past federal filings 2011 which specify a pre-trim of 2.6' and a post-trim of 12.4' (for 120kV), guidelines undoubtedly created under Ben Barnes administration. From the draft meeting notes Tom recapped that it sounded like "the code gives utilities the ability to set the distances" between vegetation and their power lines. The SCL response was "electric code says 10". Tom's impressions are actually more accurate.

You will recall that we had an attorney who had reviewed the code and said at the beginning of the meeting that it did not appear that Washington code said anything of the kind. Further if this were actually true why would four other utilities in the the same state under the same legal regulations be using 3'-6' for their pre-trim clearances if this were the case.

The City Light representatives also indicated that their distribution power lines are higher voltage than any of the surrounding utilities and that this required them to use bigger clearances. This was explained thoroughly in our original communications so I will not repeat that here but to keep it simple, one of the three additional power company guidelines that I provided at the meeting was Tacoma Power. Their clearance guidelines are established for up to 50kV or double that of Seattle's lines. They are on a 4 year pruning cycle and use 10' for a post-trim clearance so presumably ~3' as a pre-trim clearance. This utility operates under the same laws as SCL, further we all operate under the same scientific principles. Battelle and the NERC do the definitive scientific research for minimum safe vegetation clearances and they list less than half a meter for voltages up to three times those of Seattle. So it cannot be true that City Lights 26kV system requires two to three times the clearances that other utilities in our area use. Below are the additional Power Company standards provided to the Commission at your last meeting. They have been added to the list from our original communications and inquiry. The question remains why does Seattle City light need to remove so much more forest canopy than other power companies in our area. This forest canopy is a public resource which provides a healthy environment for our dense urban area, providing nearly 1/2 the air we breathe here on earth, cleaning that air, reducing global warming, cleaning our water and providing habitat for wildlife, and shade for the human wildlife on lunch break.

Why are SCL power line to vegetation clearances two to three times that of other utilities in our region?
Seattle: Pre-Trim 10'-15', Post-Trim 19'-24' (10'-15' plus 4 years of growth) Portland: Pre-Trim 3' Post-Trim 8'-10' (2-3 year trim cycle) Snohomish: Pre-Trim 4' Post-Trim 12' (Snohomish is on a 5 year trim cycle)
Centralia: Post-Trim 12' (Centralia is on an 8 year trim cycle)
Jefferson PUD: Pre-Trim 6' Post-Trim 10' (3 year trim cycle)
Tacoma Post-Trim 10' (4 year trim cycle, up to 50kV lines)

Thank You for your attention to the details of the matter. It is not one that can be presented or absorbed as a sound bite, or in a few sentences of text. This issue is severely and unnecessarily damaging our Urban Forest Canopy; we hope that we can count on the Commission's assistance with this issue. It is our understanding that the Mayor's office has charged the professionals on the Commission with bringing just such important issues as this, to their attention. Will you help to resolve this critical issue by bringing it to the attention of the Mayor and City Council?

Lance Young
Interurban Trail Tree Preservation Society
206-363-0859